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# From the Racialization of Sexism to Sexism as an Identity Marker<sup>1</sup>

*Christelle Hamel*

In recent decades, relations between the sexes among North African migrants and their French children have been regularly attracting media attention: news stories about forced marriage, honour crimes and headscarves have each in turn been given intensive coverage. With the recent focus on gang rapes, sexist behaviour patterns '*dans les quartiers*' ('on the housing estates') have once again been in the political and media spotlight. Discussion of these practices has been brought into debates about 'delinquency', 'urban violence' and 'assimilating young people of immigrant background', debates that were a marked feature of the campaigns for the municipal and presidential elections of 2001 and the parliamentary election of 2002. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States, the question of domestic security was reformulated in France around the real or supposed threat of an extremist/fundamentalist form of Islam practiced by young people of North African immigrant background. These debates strengthened the far right vote of 21 April 2002 and led to a tightening of law and order policies.

In April 2003, at a meeting of the Union des Organizations Islamiques de France in Le Bourget, Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy stated that Muslim women should appear without headscarves on their ID card photographs. This launched a third 'headscarf affair' which took up the slack from the indignation triggered earlier by gang rapes on housing estates and the fear aroused by the terrorist attacks. In the media, the headscarves worn by some young women were presented as a sign that a particularly sexist and fundamentalist form of Islam was spreading, promoted by fathers and brothers to whom these young women were considered to be completely subjugated<sup>2</sup>. This interpretation led to the passing, on 15 March 2004, of an act of parlia-

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1 This text was originally published in the journal *Migrations Sociétés* vol. 17, No.99–100 August 2006, pp. 91–104.

2 Editorial note: This text was written prior to the debate running up to and the passing of the Anti-burqa law in April 2011.

ment banning the wearing of 'religious signs' in schools. Thus male violence against women within a minority group is the prism through which political issues of a different order – migration, integration, national and international security – are perceived. The denunciation of this violence is mixed up with political issues that go far beyond the fight against sexist violence, and indeed mask that issue while manipulating it. This complicates the task of preventing such violence.

This paper examines the way in which racism manipulates the denunciation of sexism and describes the effects of such discourses on the people they target. It argues that far from reducing sexist violence, the racist logic hidden behind the anti-sexism tends to strengthen it. I use data gathered during a study on the experience of racism, sexuality and management of the risk of HIV infection conducted between 1997 and 2003 among 69 young men and women aged 18 to 25 to demonstrate my argument (Hamel 2003).

## The racialization of sexist violence and rejection of the sons of immigrants

An analysis of gender relations within North African immigrant families must pay particular attention to the dynamics of the racist social relations that shape interactions between these families and people said to be of 'French extraction'. The racism they are subjected to has an impact on the way in which post-colonial migrants and their French-born children elaborate the norms and values that guide their behaviour. Their experience of relations with 'people of French extraction' is marked by a confrontation with prejudice and discrimination in access to jobs, housing, knowledge, health care, leisure, among others. Both North African emigrants and their French-born descendants are predetermined potential targets of unequal treatment on the basis of their name or appearance, though not all are affected in the same way. The best educated and qualified possess resources that reduce the negative effects of racism and are less stigmatized than those with no qualifications. And while not all 'people of French extraction' are agents of discrimination, all are liable to receive the preferential treatment that is the counterpart of discrimination against migrants and their children. Discriminatory practices divide individuals into two groups in a hierarchy: an inferiorized minority made up of those who are subject to discrimination and a dominant majority consisting of those who practice that discrimination or are its potential beneficiaries. As racial discrimination is practiced on the basis of name or skin colour, both the groups this creates have a racial connotation reflected

in the commonly-used terms *Français de souche* (of French extraction), *Maghrébins* (North African), *Arabes* (Arabs).

Some members of the majority group highlight a few differentiating cultural features specific to some members of the minority group; this then serves to legitimize the racialized boundary line at the cultural level. Cultural traits that have come to be seen as differentiating characteristics even though they are not shared by all members of the minority group include honour crimes, religion and the wearing of headscarves, because these readily invite stigmatization. The media overkill casts discredit on all members of the 'racialized' group, who are suspected of approving such practices. They are thus relegated to an insuperable cultural otherness and considered 'impossible to integrate' because they are 'too different'. This process justifies the discrimination *a posteriori*, giving a cultural ratification for the idea of an otherness that is synonymous with 'obvious' or indeed 'natural' inferiority.

Today, this relegation of North African immigrants and their children to an insuperable otherness is channelled through the recurrent denunciation of sexist violence and the construction of separate representations of men and women. The norms governing relations between the sexes within this group are then constructed in response to the discrimination and the discourse. How has this racist and gender-specific rhetoric been elaborated? Since early 2001, the profusion and juxtaposition of TV broadcasts about *les banlieues* ('the suburban estates') have implied that violence against women is far more common there than in the rest of society and that its prevalence is due to the 'Arab'<sup>3</sup> or 'Moslem' culture of the estates' inhabitants. Through these two implied assertions, denunciation of violence has become a medium for attributing 'otherness' to the members of the minority group and a favoured ground for erecting a frontier between 'them' and 'us', making the minority group a 'foreign body' within the nation. Since sexism is assumed to be a basic archaism while sexual egalitarianism is considered proof of a 'modern' and 'civilized' mindset, sexism serves as an indicator of a social group's level of modernity and civilization.

However, the factors used to measure this sexism rule out any comparison between the discriminating majority group and the 'racialized' minority group. Since sexism takes slightly different forms in different social groups (despite a common basic pattern), the majority group can all the more fiercely censure a few particular forms of sexism found among the 'racialized' group because they, the majority group, can make a distorted comparison and claim not to be sexist themselves. Lastly, attributing only to a mi-

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3 It is worth noting that for the majority group the term 'Arab' refers to a set of individuals who do not necessarily define themselves as such.

nority group sexist practices common to all groups (collective rape) enables the majority group to focus attention on the minority group rather than making a full analysis of sexism in society as a whole.

Presenting collective or 'gang' rapes on housing estates as if they were a new and growing phenomenon that demonstrates the incompatibility between 'Moslem' and 'Western' culture, the 'clash of civilizations'<sup>4</sup>, is one example of the way sexist violence can be made an attribute of 'otherness'. The expression *jeunes de banlieue* ('youths from the estates') is used to single out the sons of post-colonial immigrants and particularly those of North African extraction without referring to them explicitly. These young men (a tiny minority of whom have committed such crimes) (Hamel 2003: 434; Jaspard et al. 2003: 370) have been accused as a body of being too attached to the 'traditional' values of their 'culture', as if their sexism could only be explained by their supposedly 'Arab' or 'Moslem' identity. The extreme male chauvinism of some of these young men and boys has been set up as revealing the essentially sexist nature of 'Arab culture', a term understood as comparable to 'archaic', 'barbarian' culture. This type of reasoning, which has reactivated the figure of the 'Arab rapist' created in the days of colonization (Zehraoui 1997), is a familiar theme on the French far right (Venner 1995), but with the media coverage of gang rapes (Hamel 2003: 124) it has spread with worrying ease through society as a whole. These young men are thus treated more than ever as 'foreigners in our midst'.

These rapes were also set up as proof that women's rights are losing ground in France, immigrants' sons being blamed for this (Guenif-Souilamas and Mace 2004: 106). The rapes are obviously unacceptable, but to legitimately speak of regression in women's rights some proof must be provided that gang rape was less common in the past and is less widespread in the majority population. Neither of these assertions is true, as we discussed in 2003 (Hamel 2003; see Debauche in this volume). The minority group being blamed for the 'regression' in women's rights, the conclusion is drawn (explicitly or implicitly) that the integration of immigrants' children 'has failed', or that it is 'impossible' and their presence on French soil not legitimate. The majority group has ignored the scale of sexist violence by men of French extraction (rape and conjugal violence occur in all social classes) (Jaspard et al. 2003) and highlighted certain cultural differences in the ways sexism is manifested (such as the will to keep women veiled) while ignoring its own particular form of sexism (reducing women to sex objects and displaying images of naked women in all kinds of circumstances). The resulting reasoning

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4 Paul Amar, 'L'islam est-il soluble dans la République?', broadcast on 16 and 19 November 2002 on TV programme *On aura tout lu !*, France 5.

not only culturalizes sexist violence but also ethnicizes and ‘racializes’ it. Sexist violence is seen as the product of an atemporal, ahistorical and highly sexist ‘Arab’ or ‘Moslem’ culture. And any individual whose phenotype matches what is called ‘Arab’ culture is seen from the outset as being sexist in this way. In short, so-called ‘Arab’ culture is considered sexist in essence and ‘Arab’ men sexist by nature. This then corroborates the idea that immigrants’ sons are incapable of integrating into French society. The denunciation of sexist violence on suburban housing estates has been used in this way by anti-Arab and anti-black xenophobic rhetoric. Such reasoning has enabled the authorities to justify closing borders to immigrants and has allowed members of the majority group a certain sense of legitimacy in discriminating against the male elements of the minority group.

## The ‘emancipated *beurette*’<sup>5</sup> as a figure of successful integration

In parallel with the stigmatization of ‘Arab boys’, the emergence of the *Ni putes ni soumises* movement (‘neither tarts nor submissive’), which rightly denounced the sexist violence in the segregated poor neighbourhoods of France’s big metropolitan areas, was very favourably received by the media, the authorities and the population. For society as a whole, the immigrants’ daughters taking part in this movement symbolize ‘successful integration’, in contrast to their brothers. They embody the figure of the ‘emancipated *beurette*’ rejecting the submission that is assumed to be systematically imposed by parents and brothers. As this image implies, for the majority group it is only by virtue of a break with the sexist ‘culture’ of their parents and brothers that the girls can integrate into society. The boys, supposedly, fiercely defend ‘their culture’. The girls, because they refuse to have their freedom restricted and to be treated differently, appear in the collective French imagination as wanting to ‘integrate’ and capable of doing so.

The majority group’s manipulation of young women’s desire to break free of patriarchal restrictions, thus, has the effect of dividing them from men, when men and women could otherwise unite in joint action against racism. For, although the women are less stigmatized in the rhetoric, they are no less discriminated against in practice. Of people of Algerian immigrant parentage aged 20 to 29 and possessing a vocational high-school certificate,

5 Translator’s note: *beurette* is a feminine form derived from *beur*, a type of back-slang for *Arabe* and an identity term that youngsters of immigrant extraction have adopted for themselves. It is less clear who invented the corresponding feminine form.

39% of the men and 36% of the women are unemployed, as against 20% and 10% respectively of young women and men with French-born parents (Tribalat 1995: 76–77). Furthermore, using denunciation of sexist violence to accuse the men of ‘not wanting to integrate’ attributes a specific meaning to the women’s revolt against sexism. That rebellion seems to validate the racist idea of male refusal to integrate, so putting the women in a position where, for the men of their group, they are implicit allies of the majority group’s racism.

## ‘Integration’ and ‘sexual emancipation’ for the daughters of immigrants

Sexuality is also at stake in discourses according to which the girls are capable of assimilating into French society but the boys are not. Metaphorically, they lead to an eroticization of the figure of the *‘beurette’*: the encouragement given these young women to emancipate themselves carries a connotation of sexual emancipation. And in a context where ‘Arab boys’ (Guenif-Souilamas and Mace 2004) are presented as male chauvinists by nature, the call to rebel against them carries a secondary message: it invites the girls to construct their sexual and emotional lives not with a man from their own group but with a man from the majority group, supposedly more ‘modern’ and less sexist. Thus, sexuality is one field in which immigrants’ sons are judged by comparison with men ‘of French extraction’. The ethnicization and racialization of sexual and sexist violence stigmatizes and devalues young men of immigrant parentage, so making those of French parentage more desirable. Whether a minority-group girl chooses a partner in her own group or the other will be interpreted as validating or invalidating the supposed lesser desirability of ‘Arab’ men<sup>6</sup>. This message transforms every daughter of immigrants into an eroticized object of male sexual competition in which the men symbolize so-called ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ categories.

Those who denounce the sexism of ‘Arab’ culture need not say (or even think) that the one group is inferior to the other for that message to be perceived by some, if not all, young men and women of North African extrac-

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6 If the reader thinks this exaggerated, here is what one young woman of North African extraction told us when this paper was presented at a research meeting in May 2004: *‘It’s the first time I’ve heard anything that made so much sense to me. It’s really how I feel. And ... forgive me for saying this, but it’s rare for a French person’*. She then added, *‘In fact, we’re really obliged to invent a new feminism, because we have to defend the men too, it’s paradoxical.’*

tion. The racialization and ethnicization of sexist violence and particularly rape already convey this message. Thus majority-group discourses that favour the daughters of immigrants but denigrate the sons often stem from a racism that makes the denunciation of sexism an instrument of its domination and sexuality one of its spheres of expression. Significantly, the interlinking of racist and sexist relations of domination can explain some young women's defence of the headscarf: since it is seen as making the wearer sexually unavailable to men of the majority group, for its wearers it may embody, consciously or not, a form of resistance against a racist eroticization that is scarcely 'emancipating'.

## Identity-marker sexism, a product of racism

The social control exercised by parents and brothers over young women's sexuality can be analysed from three standpoints: the ordinary sexism found in every society and social group, the injunction to immigrants' daughters to emancipate themselves, and the colonial history of France. We address the last point first, outlining the migratory trajectory of the parents and situating the sexism observable in some families today within its historical genealogy. Legislation in North African countries restricts women's rights to varying degrees, giving them an inferior status and criminalising extramarital sex. Family codes are the product of a patriarchal system that predates colonization, but their codification into 'positive' law after independence was also part of a wave of reaction against colonization (Daoud 1996). It has to be said that the French colonists had eroticized 'native' women by producing postcards with nude pictures of them, while the French army organized the prostitution of North African women to 'entertain' the troops (Taraud 2003) and rape was among the methods used to torture female members of the resistance or make their husbands talk<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, sexuality was one area of the exercise of colonial power, particularly in Algeria. More generally, the colonizers tried to break the resistance capacity of colonized societies by gaining the complicity of the women, called upon to 'emancipate' themselves from their husbands' domination and revolt against their fatherland. Men were described as 'sadistic vampires' who treated their wives 'barbarously' (Fanon 1959; Clancy-Smith 1998). Having been the target of the colonialists' 'emancipating' discourse, women who at the time of independence were fighting to improve their legal status

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7 See the testimony of Madame Ighilariz in the documentary by Patrick Rotman, *L'ennemi intime*, broadcast on 6 March 2002 on France 3.



and obtain equality were suspected of betraying their society and were accused of '*assimilationism or wanting to Westernize*' (Daoud 1996: 219). Their place in the family became a focus of nationalist discourse: keeping women in their inferior status and controlling their sexuality in the name of Islam, the newly-proclaimed State religion, kept opposition to colonialism alive but also accentuated the pre-existing patriarchal thinking, incorporating it into the emerging national identity.

Among the North African women who came to France after decolonization, clearly some were leaving their country to escape the gradually hardening norms governing relations between the sexes. Equally clearly, others were steeped in that mode of thinking. Today, male immigrants are represented as 'backward' fathers, particularly sexist towards their wives and daughters. It is now the daughters who are encouraged to emancipate themselves and the sons regarded as delinquents or even rapists. This cannot but help to maintain, reactivate or activate strong social control over the daughters. While many immigrants have abandoned the plan of one day going back, some refer back to their country of origin when considering the education of their daughters; they refer to the values that are, or were, prevalent there rather than those current in France. It follows that some may see their daughters' desire for independence as a validation of racism, which in turn leads to increased surveillance. The discriminatory way in which girls are raised is not the same as the sexism found in the majority group: it can be said to be an identity marker because it is part and parcel of a process of self-defence against racism.

## Identity issues in virginity and choice of spouse

*Identity-marker sexism* is reflected above all in the control of girls' sexuality. Girls are generally required to remain virgins, though there is almost no such requirement for boys. Since this is the case in many situations where colonization and racism are not at issue, it is not our aim here to explain the root cause, which is undeniably a patriarchal mindset. Our aim is to explain why the parents continue to give importance to their daughters' virginity once they have emigrated, whereas one might expect this notion to have lost all meaning for those who have been in France for several decades. A survey conducted on young people's sexual behaviour in 1994 showed that the girls are raised to respect the principle of virginity: of girl respondents with one or both North African parents, only 45.8% had already had sexual intercourse at the age of 18, compared to 70.3% of girls with two French parents and

79.1% of sons of North African immigrants (Lagrange and Lhomond 1997). Maintaining this norm is one reaction to the racist rhetoric described above. In a social climate where denunciation of sexist cultural traits sends the message to North African immigrants and their French sons that they should be ashamed of their culture and their being, any daughter's desire to transgress the rules can be seen as a kind of validation of the racist discourse, and hence as a rejection of their parents, their history, their 'culture', their group and their being. Zora, a 21-year-old undergraduate student of English, had to have long discussions with her parents, who worried about preserving her virginity, before they would allow her out in the evenings:

For our parents, we're forgetting them if we want to make things change. For them, it's all a question of traditions, religion and honour. Honour above all! And they say 'We came to France, but that's no reason to behave the way they do!' In fact they don't want us to assimilate. [...] But you know, if I actually did listen to them and drop my studies they'd be disappointed too in a way. So we have to do things against their will too, and in spite of everything, they're happy, but it's tiring, because they reproach us, 'Take care! The family back there ... you have to follow the lineage'.

The parents' fear of seeing their daughters disown them is understandable when we examine the discourse that incites them to 'integrate' by making a break with their family and 'emancipating themselves' sexually with men of the majority group. This fear helps to maintain the importance placed on virginity and family honour and helps to perpetuate the social control.

The choice of spouse is another area in which daughters' sexuality is controlled. In 1992, the INED survey *Mobilité géographique et insertion sociale* (Geographical mobility and social integration) (Tribalat, Riandey and Simon 1992) revealed that among French people aged 20 to 29 born of Algerian parents, 15% of the women had a spouse whose parents were both French, compared to 50% of the boys (Tribalat 1995: 78). This imbalance shows how far girls' and boys' sexuality is treated differently in the family. Of the 27 young women interviewed, 23 said they could not consider marrying someone of French 'extraction' without risking a break with their parents, and four had an elder sister who had been '*banished from the family*' for that reason. Conversely, three said that their mothers had guaranteed them the right to choose their own husband, regardless of his so-called 'ethnic' origin.

It also emerges that those who do choose to live with a man of French extraction are often stigmatized: Seif, studying for a degree in Arabic, refused to involve himself in his sister's love life and attached no importance to the virginity of his future wife, but explained how much a 'mixed' marriage by his sister would be felt as a betrayal:

He must be North African! A Moslem first and North African second. Even better if he is Moroccan! [laughter] If he's French that will pose a lot of problems. My parents would take it very badly. She would have to expect a break with the family and to not see certain people any more. It's a question of what you belong to: at root, belonging to the religion, the culture, everything. For my parents, we're Moroccan and that's that! We're not French. Whether we're here or there makes no difference, we're Arabs of France. Integration doesn't exist for them, doesn't mean anything. They don't want to integrate into French society. They've understood that our lives are here, but let's keep among ourselves. She couldn't possibly marry someone from outside [...]. My father, he couldn't tell his brothers, his friends back there, his family back there, that his daughter was marrying a Frenchman. If only as a matter of honour he couldn't do it. It's a matter of honour! Your daughter's married a Frenchman, so she's a tart, ain't she. She's considered a tart because she's given herself away.

To really grasp the sense of what Seif's parents feel regarding their daughter's husband and understand what is meant by the expression 'integration doesn't exist', we must take into account that they have vigorously encouraged all their sons and daughters to undertake long years of study and that they are not thinking of going back to Morocco. Seif explains this as follows: *'My father is too French in his head now: he could never go back there'*. So while this father has adopted 'French' values, he feels 'Moslem' and 'Moroccan' when it comes to his children's 'integration' or more precisely his daughter's sexuality. Seif also explained that if his sister lost her virginity, that would not dishonour her in her father's eyes as long as she married a North African. But marriage with a Frenchman would be dishonourable even if she were still a virgin.

So virginity would appear less important than the spouse's so-called 'ethnic' origin. A so-called 'mixed' marriage would mean that the daughter had validated the stigmatization aimed at the father along with all other 'Arab' men, presented as being less desirable than so-called 'French' men. Thus the term 'integration', as associated by the dominant group with a girl's 'mixed' marriage, implies relegating the father to 'racial' inferiority. It underpins society's 'dehumanization' of him and we can well imagine that this is hard to bear. Unable to react against the dominant group, he turns on his daughter. These marriages are dishonourable above all because they are perceived as a betrayal of the family's identity and a breaking of solidarity with the men of the minority group. The importance placed on the principle of virginity in the migrant community has more to do with preventing these 'mixed' marriages than with the desire to forbid the daughter any form of pre-marital sex.

## Social control of girls and sexist violence

A study of media discourses and ethnographic data shows that sexuality is socially constructed by racist social relations. These racist social relations manipulate gender divisions and present women's sexual choices as either validating or invalidating racist discourse. This makes women's sexuality a particular issue for the minority group, men's social control over them tends to increase and the result is sometimes violence. It is a mistake to think that this control and violence are due to 'Moslem' or 'North African' culture, irrespective of time and place, being 'more sexist' than others. Although this 'culture' like any other is based on a hierarchy between the sexes, it cannot be said that its sexism has not changed over the centuries or that it is not liable to change. On the contrary, it can be said with certainty that the exacerbated sexism of some North African emigrant men and some of their French sons today is partly due to the racism characteristic of the current socio-historical context. By presenting North African immigrant men and their sons born in France as sexist by nature, this racism tends, as we have seen, to result in some of them behaving in accordance with this 'mythical portrait' (Memmi 2002).

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